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MIKE MULLEN OF ILWU LOCAL NUMBER 14, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: MIKE MULLEN

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[00:00:00] **RON:** Well, let's start. Where were you born?

[00:00:11] **MIKE:** Los Angeles, California in 1937. Echo Park/Silver Lake area. Definitely central L.A.

[00:00:21] **RON:** And your name was always Michael?

[00:00:26] **MIKE:** Always was. I was named Michael Mullen right from the get-go.

[00:00:31] **RON:** And you stayed with that. You stayed in the school system?

[00:00:38] **MIKE:** I went through the L.A. school system. When I was in early high school, I went to work in the produce market and joined my first union, which was the retail clerks. I worked in the markets for five, six years. Went to work for Coca-Cola as a teamster. Worked there for a couple years. Worked for about a

year-and-a-half for Mickey Cohen [gangster] after he got out of prison.

[00:01:13] **RON:** Did you!

[00:01:14] **MIKE:** He opened up—I think [Al] Capone did it or somebody—he [Cohen] opened up a nursery and a florist shop. We did a plant rental business. I was one of three people driving truck, and renting plants, and putting them in buildings, and things like that. It was kind of funny because, if you got off early, you'd go in the back and water plants and the greenhouse. Take care of that stuff. Every now and then you'd come back in the greenhouse, and there'd be some definitely. . .businessmen standing back there talking quietly.

[00:01:50] **RON:** Did they have double-breasted suits?

[00:01:51] **MIKE:** They did. From Chicago. That kind of a thing. You knew they weren't in there to buy plants, that's for sure.

[00:02:01] **RON:** About what year?

[00:02:02] **MIKE:** '58, '57, something like that.

[00:02:07] **RON:** In that era.

[00:02:08] **MIKE:** Yes, right in there.

[00:02:12] **RON:** How long did you last there?

[00:02:15] **MIKE:** He closed down after less than a year. They shut him down. I don't know why. I think they sent him back to jail or something. I had gotten married, and my wife and I went to Mexico. Lived in Mexico City for about three months. Traveled all over lower Mexico. Had a great time. Shared an apartment with a man by the name Mel Van Peebles, who ended up becoming rather famous making films and all kinds of other stuff. In New York, his son became a model for magazines, and then he started making movies himself. Mario Van Peebles is his name.

[00:03:05] **RON:** What kind of movies? Documentaries, or?

[00:03:08] **MIKE:** Well, Mel's first film was about cable cars. No, he did a book about cable cars. Then he did a film about a bunch of kids playing on the docks in San Francisco and trying to get up enough courage to jump into the bay. It was just a short flick. It's a long story. He ended up in Paris. There was a guy who was putting together a film festival for San Francisco. They heard about his film, they took it, they brought Mel to San Francisco, they showed his film. He was the first Black director to get a job in Hollywood. He did a film called Watermelon Man with Godfrey Cambridge. Then he went on to make a movie called Sweetback [Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song], which was about a Black man who ends up, in the process of the film, killing four cops and gets away with it. One of the funny parts of that was, all the people who worked in the film, he offered them part of the profit, whatever the film made. Most of their attitudes was they didn't want any part of the rope that was going to be used to hang him. They wanted wages! He ended up making something like \$2 million on that.

[00:04:29] **RON:** An Alfred Hitchcock plot!

[00:04:31] **MIKE:** Yes, yes. Anyhow, so, where are we? Oh, I'm back in L.A. still. Married another woman. Ended up with [?nine?] children, and moved north to the Bay area. Had a friend who was a longshoreman. One

night he had the guy who was president of his local, Jimmy Herman, over to dinner, and I was there. We talked. I had since moved. I was buying a house in Eureka [California] . We talked about politics, and we talked about art. We talked about history. We never talked about longshoring. At the end of the night, Jimmy said, “I understand you live in Eureka, and you want to do longshoring.” I said, “Yes, I would like to do that.” He said, “I’ll send you a letter.”

That was the beginning of my longshoring. He sent me a letter. I went into the hall after I got the letter. I went in about 9:30 in the morning. The dispatcher said, “What do you want here?” I said, well, I was looking for Dennis Hooper, who had worked with Jimmy in the organizing of the MCS [Marine Cooks and Stewards Union] .

[00:05:57] **RON:** My father was a MCS.

[00:06:00] **MIKE:** Oh! Ok. Anyhow, the dispatcher said, “If you want to see Dennis, come back tomorrow morning.” I said, Ok. So I came back in the morning. I went in and handed him the letter. He read the letter, he grunted, and he said, “Go out in the hall.” I went out in the hall. I was just standing around; I didn’t have a clue what to do. They called the Amen, and then they called the B-men. They started calling casual. I think I was the eleventh out on the casual list. Just walking in off the street, but I had that letter.

[00:06:33] **RON:** Did you meet Jimmy later?

[00:06:35] **MIKE:** Again, you mean? Oh yes. I saw him again. Because it meant a lot to me.

[00:06:45] **RON:** He was very fine.

[00:06:47] **MIKE:** Yes, he was. All the stories about him driving and stuff, with the big, thick glasses. I came to the 1990 caucus convention. I think it was in Seattle?

[00:07:03] **RON:** Yes, I was there.

[00:07:05] **MIKE:** That was Jimmy [Herman] ’s last one. It was my first caucus convention, but it was a good one. That’s where I met Rich Austin and a lot of other people.

[00:07:17] **RON:** He never gave an interview, you know. By odd circumstance, I was at the hall, just sitting and waiting for a person I was going to interview, and he was there. He asked me what I was doing. I said, “I’m here to help interview.” Then I was tinkering with the camera, trying to set it up so it would be just right, and he started talking to me. Pretty quick, we were in the interview mode. He was telling me his life story. It was wonderful. Just a great person, you know, in so many ways. He had to follow this icon of the union—

[00:08:07] **MIKE:** Harry [Bridges] .

[00:08:08] **RON:** Harry [Bridges] . A hard act to follow.

[00:08:11] **MIKE:** Very.

[00:08:13] **RON:** But I liked Jimmy [Herman] very much. Tell me about the first day on the job. You remember the first job?

[00:08:24] **MIKE:** Oh, yes. You have to understand, when I got to Eureka, I had long hair and a beard.

[00:08:31] **RON:** Ooh!

[00:08:32] **MIKE:** And I showed up in that hall and got a lot of strange looks. That was in '66, somewhere in there. No, a little earlier than that. '63, I think. So everybody was kind of looking at me. Then I got the job; I was called. All the casuals who had been there behind, where I suddenly was placed, were sort of glaring at me. There were three Black men in that local at that time. Coming out of L.A., I always related to minorities really well. I went up to one of them and started talking. "Where is the dock?" "Follow me." I went to the dock with him. I said, "Where am I?" "The swing sheet's in the window. We'll go take a look." I was in the same hatch with him.

So all of that was easy, you know? We got down in the hatch. We were flooring off redwood. Wet redwood. There was two other A-men—we were working two sides of the hatch—the A-men for some reason kept getting these 10-foot or 12-foot length loads. I and my partner kept getting the 16-24 feet loads. A lot of it was heavy 2 by 12, things like that. So I just started learning what I could. We were walking and my partner dropped his end of the wood. It was about an 18-footer. Just tore up the inside of the both of my legs. Fortunately, there was a couple of A-men on the other side, and they saw it. They came running over, and they just reamed this guy for dropping it. They wanted to make sure I was OK, so I had a feeling that this was going to work out. I went home for lunch, and I took a look at my legs. [shakes head] But I went back to work. Ended up getting 16 or 17 days right there in a run.

[00:10:56] **RON:** At work.

[00:10:58] **MIKE:** At work. The funny part was, I came back after lunch. We'd finished flooring. I didn't understand that meant we were going to bring in a forklift. Suddenly they're like, "Just go back in the wing and hide out for a while." The way we used to do with a forklift, setting stickers, and unhooking. I liked the job a whole lot more after doing that. That part of it became a lot nicer than flooring off.

But I really enjoyed it. Prior to it, I'd already read *The Big Strike* [by Mike Quin, on the 1934 Strike] , and I came from a very liberal, left-wing background. So, I felt I fit in with the structure of the union. I was surprised that Eureka was not more in that line, but it was a different port.

[00:11:59] **RON:** Every port has its own—

[00:12:00] **MIKE:** Its own character.

[00:12:01] **RON:** You bet.

[00:12:02] **MIKE:** So that was my first day. I heard you mention earlier "one of your worst days on the waterfront."

[00:12:11] **RON:** That's right. We'll get to that. Was your first day your worst?

[00:12:15] **MIKE:** No, no. We all had lots of different experiences. I and a partner of mine, we went to L.A. looking for work. There was going to be no work in Eureka.

[00:12:29] **RON:** Traveling.

[00:12:29] **MIKE:** Traveling. So we went to San Francisco. It was New Year's Eve. We worked a four-hour shift, and left. There wasn't going to be any more work there. So we went to L.A. and we got on the nightside on a rubber ship. I had no idea what I was getting into. We got down in the hatch. There were six of us, working 40 on and 40 off working on both sides of the shaft alley. I and my partner, we didn't have hooks. We didn't have a clue. We were trying to pull this stuff with our hands. It's of course packed in talcum powder. They just laid it in

there, and between them, and you had to pull these things apart. We had no idea that you could bounce them into the net, so we're rolling them over into the net. After about our second time, the two guys who were off came over and said, "You guys can use our hooks." They started teaching us how to do it. It was a miserable night. It took probably a month to get the talcum powder out of all the seams in my boots, my clothes, and everything else. I decided I would never work rubber again. And I managed not to.

The next night, we went into the hall, and we couldn't get out. So we left, and we drove to San Francisco. We got there for morning dispatch, and we didn't make a job. We were newly registered A-men; we'd gone from B to A. So we gave up, "Let's go home." We go home, and there was work on a pulp ship. Hand stowing pulp. We took it. That was not too bright, but a lot of times we did things that weren't too bright. Yes, you did what you had to do.

[00:14:47] **RON:** How big was the Eureka local?

[00:14:50] **MIKE:** When I started, it was probably somewhere around 150-something. When I left, it was probably, about 28 guys. 32 maybe.

[00:15:07] **RON:** Geez. Mechanization.

[00:15:07] **MIKE:** Mechanization. We went from nine-man hand-stow gangs loading somewhere between 250 and 300 tons a day, a shift, to the big monk cranes. You know, picking them up, bringing them in, unhook, automatic, go back out. At least 300 tons an hour with six men. People would go, "Oh, you guys are way overpaid." Wait a minute, take a look at the production line. I think we went on hand-stowing for about 10 or 12 years after I got there. Then we started using other methods of putting it in. Squeeze lifts.

[00:15:56] **RON:** Eureka mechanized slowly?

[00:15:59] **MIKE:** Slowly. Almost all of our cargo was bulk cargo. We had logs; we had chips; we had lumber; and we had pulp, and that was it. During '63, I wasn't there after the big flood there, but they brought stuff in because the highways were all wiped out. They brought stuff in by barge or ship. Evidently it was a real field day for work. There was lots and lots of work.

[00:16:26] **RON:** It was up and down, the work.

[00:16:29] **MIKE:** Yes, it always was. At one point, during the Vietnam War, we had about six docks, and we would have a ship at every dock. We would have sometime two laying on the hook, waiting for work. Because we shipped lots and lots of logs.

[00:16:48] **RON:** In '67?

[00:16:50] **MIKE:** Yes, we had lots of logs and we shipped them.

[00:16:55] **RON:** You worked logs?

[00:16:56] **MIKE:** Oh, yes.

[00:16:58] **RON:** On the boom, or. . . ?

[00:17:00] **MIKE:** Down in the hold. I worked logs when we still had the donkeys. I worked logs after we got the swinging booms, and, then after we got the whirlies [cranes], I was still working logs. Hated working the

wings. With the rollers, you know.

[00:17:18] **RON:** So did everybody.

[00:17:19] **MIKE:** Yes. Every now and then you'd meet somebody who loved to do it. String it and set it up.

[00:17:25] **RON:** Yes, the challenge.

[00:17:29] **MIKE:** Yes. The challenge. Saw a man killed on a log ship.

[00:17:34] **RON:** Did you?

[00:17:35] **MIKE:** Yes.

[00:17:35] **RON:** Tell me about that.

[00:17:39] **MIKE:** I was on deck and I was the signal man for the donkey. The donkey was across the hatch. A guy came along; he was a casual. He was standing, watching, from the hatch on the inshore side. They brought a load on the deck, and it was sitting there across the hatch on the railing. There was a double-handled winch, one of the steam jobs. I guess the guy who was on the offshore side didn't see this guy at all, just released a little on his winch. The log just slapped over and killed the guy right there. That was the first time I'd ever seen someone just really hurt like that, killed. They shut the ship down, and we all went home. Which I thought was— [nods]

[00:18:34] **RON:** The right thing?

[00:18:35] **MIKE:** Progressive, yes. A good thing to do, to really show respect.

[00:18:39] **RON:** Were you on the LRC [Labor Relations Counsel] or any of the committees at the local?

[00:18:51] **MIKE:** Yes, I was. I worked 35 years on the waterfront. First 17-and-a-half [years] , as I say, I was very political, but I also was getting into some rather addictive things. Fortunately for me, I met a man named George Cobbs. We did some work together. So I spent the other 17-and-half years really working within the union structure. I was president for at least 1214 years. I was head of the LRC. I was the caucus delegate, the convention delegate. I got to know everybody at the International real well. Couple times when David ran, he ended up spending the night at my place on the road. Ryan and I became friends. Richard and I are long-time friends. So I really felt involved in the whole political end of it. There was a point towards the end of my addiction where I would stand up at a meeting and want to say something. They would just, "Sit down, Mike. We'll listen to it later." So, it was a really good experience for me. Not only did the union give me a job, now a pension, and a great life, it also saved my life. So I am now enjoying the pension and all the other benefits.

[00:20:28] **RON:** You made it through.

[00:20:29] **MIKE:** I made it through.

[00:20:34] **RON:** The ups and downs. Did you travel much?

[00:20:40] **MIKE:** Traveled some. Once we came north, Longview [Washington] . We used to go up to Coos Bay [Oregon] every now and then. Sacramento [California] and Stockton [California] and San Francisco [California] are our travel area, from Eureka. We mainly went to Sacramento and Stockton.

[00:21:00] **RON:** Stockton was a sugar port, wasn't it?

[00:21:03] **MIKE:** It was a sugar port. They got into a whole lot of rice also. Sacramento did most of the rice.

[00:21:09] **RON:** They did a lot of bulk work.

[00:21:10] **MIKE:** They did a lot of bulk work. They had all kinds of stuff coming in. They also had some kind of a junkyard.

[00:21:22] **RON:** The container hitting the Eureka waterfront was not much of a—

[00:21:29] **MIKE:** No, it had almost no impact at all. I can remember seeing the first plywood boxes. They were real big, and we'd put them on deck and lash them down. Or they'd be on deck, and we'd have to move them or something. But I had no idea what they were, you know.

[00:21:46] **RON:** Did they call them Connex?

[00:21:47] **MIKE:** I don't even remember what they go, yes. That was prior to '71.

[00:21:58] **RON:** Eureka stayed pretty much out of the mainstream.

[00:22:04] **MIKE:** We were always out of the mainstream. The reason we had a dual charter was because the clerks in San Francisco had no desire to drive to Eureka. When I moved up to Eureka, it was logging trucks on the road all the time. It was two lanes for well over half of the way from the city, winding through all these trees. So nobody wanted to drive up in there, and nobody wanted to go there. So they made us a dual charter. We had clerks and we had a supercargo there. It was just so out of the way.

[00:22:40] **RON:** Was there any major division between the liberals and the conservatives in the local?

[00:22:51] **MIKE:** You mean, was I having a problem? [laughing]

[00:22:55] **RON:** You could put it that way. The ILWU is considered a radical union anyway you want to—especially by [AFL-CIO President Richard] Trumka. In comparison to say, the carpenters and the plumbers in Eureka, where would you put the longshore local?

[00:23:25] **MIKE:** I was a member of the labor council for quite a few years. It was sort of like everybody knew that we were our own different union; that we had our own ways of dealing; that we did things that they definitely considered too radical. It really wasn't a radical local. I was called "hippie" and that name stayed with me all the way through to my retirement. I walk in the hall now, "Hey, hippie, how's it going?" [laughing] I haven't been a hippie in a long time! And I wasn't! I tried to explain the difference: I was a beatnik. They were like, "Oh, no, you're a hippie. They didn't understand that. [Ron laughs] I think there may have been a couple other liberals in the union. Nobody wanted to talk much about that end of it. It was safer just to be middle of the road.

[00:24:28] **RON:** What was the long history of Eureka? Was there an ILA [International Longshoremen's Association] local there? There must have been.

[00:24:34] **MIKE:** There could have been in kind of a sad state of history. Supposedly during the '34 strike, Eureka kept right on working. Harry never came to the local, and Jimmy never came to the local their entire time. Because the local had this black spot. I wasn't there when any of that was going on, but there was this

black spot on the local. They worked all cargos, and, as far as I know, they never slashed prices or anything like that. I did have guys tell me at one point that we'd be better off without the international. We could make our own deals. That's not too bright!

[00:25:31] **RON:** That's normal. In every port, there are those that want to drop out, and not pay the dues, and think they're going to make big money.

[00:25:42] **MIKE:** I know! I mean, I hadn't realized it was that normal. I thought these guys were just so crazy.

[00:25:50] **RON:** We called them "sellouts."

[00:25:52] **MIKE:** Yes. A good name for them.

[00:25:57] **RON:** You got along fine, though, with Jimmy and he understood. Would the membership—what would Eureka do about apartheid or scrap iron in Japan? They were never involved in social?

[00:26:18] **MIKE:** No.

[00:26:19] **RON:** It's a strictly porkchop union. [a union focused only on livelihood]

[00:26:23] **MIKE:** Yes, yes, I know the term. When San Francisco State [University] had all the problems [student strike] , and there was all these—the cops, the everything, the protesters—

[00:26:34] **RON:** You should have been right there, were you?

[00:26:36] **MIKE:** No, most of the guys in that local really thought the cops should be beating them more severely. I kept trying to point out, "Do you know what a strike looks like? Do you know what people trying to get a job looks like?" [Ron laughs.] They could not connect those two. Hated environmentalists. I tried to point out one time, you know how I have them come down with a sensor when we have machines running to make sure the gas level isn't too high? We have safety meetings. They were like, "Yes?" I said, "That's our environment and those are our environmentalists." "Oh, no, no, it's different." "Tree huggers" is what they called everybody. All the treehuggers, they were ruining everything for everybody.

[00:27:22] **RON:** John Munson spoke about that today on coal.

[00:27:26] **MIKE:** Yes, he did, yes.

[00:27:29] **RON:** We have 30 trains a day going through Seattle-Tacoma full of coal going to Vancouver.

[00:27:37] **MIKE:** Right, Leonard said thank you for the coal.

[00:27:45] **RON:** [laughing]

[00:27:45] **MIKE:** Also, when Jim was talking from Coos Bay about the gas place there. They tried to build on in Eureka. They convinced up there was going to be all this work for the longshore and all these other trades. The community got together, and came out, and just refused to let them build it. They wanted to build it on of the peninsula. If you look at a map of earthquakes in the United States, you can't see Eureka. It's the only place you can't see a town because we have so many earthquakes. They wanted to build that plant out there, and everybody just said, no. No. Furthermore, they had offered up deals. No boat could move on the harbor while they brought their ships in and out. All kinds of things that just made it sound way too dangerous. We turned

them down. So, when Jim was saying it was headed back to California, definitely not to our part.

[00:28:53] **RON:** What is the future of the local? What do you think? Has it got a future?

[00:28:59] **MIKE:** If it has a future, there are a couple of different possibilities. One, they're talking about building a railroad that would run from Eureka to the valley. Now, there's a lot of mountains in between, but they're pretty good about moving things through mountains nowadays. It's not like the old days. If they did that, I think we would have a big future. We have a tremendous amount of dock space, hundreds of acres of space that were docks, even, that are just quietly rotting into the ground. I've tried to figure out, over the period when I was working, maybe setting up a container repair station. Something like that. They could barge up containers. Ships could drop off containers. When we got enough of them to make it worthwhile to pick them up, they could pick them up. Because we have all that land just sitting there.

They've talked about trying to make it a container port. We don't have any big cranes or any place where I think you could really put a big crane without doing a lot of excavation, and concrete, and things like that just to get support. The log industry is almost dead. As I've said, we have 10-12 log ships a year now. The chips, they built that big facility, and they haven't put a ship there yet in three years. It was a chip dock for years, and we had chip ships coming fairly regularly. But then it dropped off, and the dock was allowed to rust all the way away. Now they've put all this money in there, but they haven't had a ship there yet. It seems that the market for chips has really dropped off. So I've no idea. When I talk to them, that's the only two things they're talking about. If they could figure out some sort of a barge system or something, I think we have 500-600 ships go by every year. They would love to have them berth. We got a deep channel. We can handle up to 40 feet.

[00:31:18] **RON:** That may be your salvation, the deep channel. Deep water.

[00:31:23] **MIKE:** Yes, deep water channel.

[00:31:24] **RON:** Because there aren't that many places left.

[00:31:26] **MIKE:** Right, so that's a hope. My feeling is sooner or later, something will come. They'll figure out something to do with it.

[00:31:34] **RON:** Container storage yard?

[00:31:36] **MIKE:** That could work, too. I hadn't even thought about something like that.

[00:31:42] **RON:** What is really happening is, last month, Tacoma had a 10,000 container ship that came in. 10,000 and they said that there are four more being constructed.

[00:31:58] **MIKE:** These are the super ones.

[00:31:59] **RON:** These are the super ones. They can't even go through the new Panama Canal.

[00:32:03] **MIKE:** Even the new part yet?

[00:32:04] **RON:** Even the new part!

[00:32:05] **MIKE:** Really!

[00:32:06] **RON:** The ship is bigger than even the new Panama Canal. Only one port on the East Coast can

handle it, and that's Norfolk. Only one.

[00:32:18] **MIKE:** Only one in the whole East Coast?

[00:32:19] **RON:** No, Elizabethtown. Only one. Amazing. So the shipping industry is going faster than the longshore mechanization. He said 14.5 million containers in L.A. this year.

[00:32:39] **MIKE:** This morning, right.

[00:32:40] **RON:** It was 17 million three years ago.

[00:32:45] **MIKE:** So it's dropped off? Wow.

[00:32:46] **RON:** It's dropped off. There were 127 million containers moved, but look at the size of that California, Los Angeles, cut. Los Angeles does not have storage for containers.

[00:33:04] **MIKE:** No?

[00:33:04] **RON:** I shouldn't say this; I'm supposed to be interviewing you! [laughing] Here I am forecasting. Los Angeles is its optimum size, and it has to find a place to put 10,000 empties that can be taken down to put on the ship. They are looking for storage.

[00:33:40] **MIKE:** Right.

[00:33:41] **RON:** I don't know about the San Francisco area, but, if you have deep water in Eureka and you have the space, you could get in there. Because that's a key part. What happened in Seattle was that they ran out of space. They can't handle a 4,000-container ship.

[00:34:06] **MIKE:** Wow.

[00:34:07] **RON:** They can't, and here's this 10,000-container [ship] coming in docking at Tacoma. Big, huge damn thing.

[00:34:17] **MIKE:** I think I've seen pictures of them. They're just really outrageous. Fast. Very fast.

[00:34:23] **RON:** Yes, they are. The knottage [sic], everything is built to—it's a floating warehouse inventory. That world is coming. Maybe Eureka could land up on top simply handling storage and maintenance.

[00:34:44] **MIKE:** Right, right. As I say, there's lots and lots of land.

[00:34:48] **RON:** There's opportunity. I know this is a little bit off the subject, but, going back, are many of the Eureka longshore workforce generational, families?

[00:35:02] **MIKE:** Oh yes. We had three or four families just year after year having one of their kids coming on. For those of us who didn't come from that place, we were just like, 'ok, here comes another one of those guys.'

[00:35:22] **RON:** I was called "an import," I understand that too. Were there any major controversies in the union with the international? Do you remember any frictions?

[00:35:47] **MIKE:** Not while I was there. There was that one back in '34, which would have been a real

problem.

[00:35:55] **RON:** This is the first one I've heard of.

[00:36:01] **MIKE:** I couldn't give you the exact dates or anything else because I didn't study the history of it that seriously. But, other than that, we just went along. There were several guys who came, got registered, and then went to San Francisco who were political and things like that. A couple guys I think went north. It was sort of a good place to get registered and then get out of. I planned, when I first went there—I had this friend in San Francisco, who'd introduced me to Jimmy, in the clerks union. When I was in Eureka, once I got registered, I figured you had to wait a year or whatever. Then I'd go join the [Local] 34 in the clerks. The clerks and Local 10 made a deal: the clerks wouldn't take anybody out of the area. If they needed people, they took them directly out of Local 10. That was about two months before I was getting ready to move. So, I stayed in Eureka. And I'm happy I did. I like Eureka.

[00:37:06] **RON:** The community was a pleasure to live in?

[00:37:09] **MIKE:** It's a beautiful place to live.

[00:37:12] **RON:** I've had lunch there, going through.

[00:37:17] **MIKE:** I didn't mention I was also an artist.

[00:37:22] **RON:** Did you do waterfront—

[00:37:24] **MIKE:** No. I started out as a potter and then got into sculpting. Was involved in the whole L.A. art movement in the fifties and sixties. Ended up showing in New York. Never made a living off of it. When I went longshoring, one of the things that I loved about it was that I could have time to work on my stuff and not have to be constantly on the job every day. In fact, that was in my interview when they were asking why I wanted to be a longshoreman. "Well, I'm actually an artist, and I just want to have a job."

[00:37:58] **RON:** I know a lot of longshoremen who had dual careers. A lot of them, especially poets. I ran into more poets in the longshore union interviewing. . .

[00:38:13] **MIKE:** I have a daughter who's a poet.

[00:38:16] **RON:** My mother was a poet.

[00:38:18] **MIKE:** My daughter teaches at Louisiana State University. She got a National Endowment for the Arts. When she first started to become a poet, I told her why don't you just take a two by four and go out in the alley and hit yourself for a couple of hours? [laughing] "No, Dad, I'm going to . . ." Ok.

[00:38:36] **RON:** But it happened.

[00:38:38] **MIKE:** It happened. She got a scholarship to the Iowa writing school [Iowa Writers Workshop] for her masters.

[00:38:44] **RON:** Do you have shows? Do you have anything permanent?

[00:38:46] **MIKE:** Not anymore. There was a time when I was showing a lot. I had a bronze show about seven or eight years ago. The nice thing about having the longshore was I ended up being able to do it for my own

enjoyment and my own creative release. Earlier on in L.A. I was desperately trying to make a living and support a wife and kids. That just wasn't working.

[00:39:21] **RON:** Pulling apart. Have you continued?

[00:39:27] **MIKE:** Every now and then I still do a piece. I have a really big garden now. I've become a gardener. It's really a beautiful garden.

[00:39:38] **RON:** Coming through the years, did you work in a gang?

[00:39:42] **MIKE:** Actually, what we did was work partners. We didn't have regular full gangs that worked together.

[00:39:51] **RON:** Who was your partner mostly?

[00:39:53] **MIKE:** A man by the name of Robert Stillner, who originally was from Tacoma [Washington] and ended up down there. Then [he] went to Coos Bay, and I believe he committed suicide in Coos Bay.

[00:40:11] **RON:** Coos Bay was too hard on him.

[00:40:13] **MIKE:** Well, he had had one of those lives. Lots of crazy stuff. He'd go off on drinking binges for weeks at a time and things like that. Then, all of a sudden, he'd be back in the hall and we'd be working together again. That's how it worked.

[00:40:34] **RON:** Alcoholism is a problem. Well, it's in every career. I don't think you can cite it as an occupational hazard.

[00:40:45] **MIKE:** Well, a long time ago, I was at an alcohol and drug workshop, and a very high-up person in PMA [Pacific Maritime Association] came to address the workshop. He said, "Is there anyone here with a tape recorder?" There were a couple of guys taping, and he said, "Turn them off." He said, "I want you to know since the first Egyptian boats left the docks, we found the safest way to ship cargo was to put about three layers of alcohol on top of it. The longshoremen will drink it and they won't get into the stuff below."

[00:41:31] **RON:** Interesting.

[00:41:32] **MIKE:** Yes. So we've never really discouraged it on the job.

[00:41:38] **RON:** I went to Egypt in 1996. I went to one of the pyramids along the Nile. There was a sailing ship sculpted into the rock, and I looked at it. Up at the top of the sail was a hook, and I thought, 'My god!' And there's a rope on the hook that they pull down and pull up the sail and also the cargo. They had little pictures. But underneath that was one of the most incredible things. It translated what it was saying. It said, "We work for fat cats."

[00:42:32] **MIKE:** Really! They knew then! [All laughing]

[00:42:38] **RON:** They knew then! And so, I took a big picture of that, and I brought it back. It didn't go very far. Nobody in Seattle or Tacoma was very interested. 'We don't care,' you know how it is. But the Japanese longshore delegation saw it. "Oh, we want that. We want that!" Sure, you can have it! So they put it in a museum in early longshoring. It's just crazy.

[00:43:10] **MIKE:** It's only since they got into the really fancy, big machinery, expensive stuff, 1981 or something, that they began to put the drug and alcohol program for the coast.

[00:43:26] **RON:** I think that's a very good program.

[00:43:28] **MIKE:** Oh, I think it's the best in the country, actually.

[00:43:32] **RON:** It's Thursday, noon, at the hall. I think it's called the Bill Club, or something like that.

[00:43:40] **MIKE:** Friends of Bill. [Friends of Bill W., euphemism for Alcoholics Anonymous]

[00:43:43] **RON:** That's it. It's very quiet, and I don't know how many go there on Thursday. But it's very strong within the local. I know the president of it, and I think the world of him. He went through all that.

[00:44:02] **MIKE:** Yes, it has saved thousands of lives on the West Coast.

[00:44:09] **RON:** Yes, it has. You can't make it alone sometimes. I feel strong about that. That's one of the aspects of the union that's really great. And they take care of each other.

[00:44:21] **MIKE:** Yes, they do. As I said, they've saved so many lives. I know the PMA, I mean, they get a longshoreman back.

[00:44:34] **RON:** Yes, they do.

[00:44:35] **MIKE:** A real longshoreman, who's really able to work and knows what's happening. All that training that he picked up over the years is now available.

[00:44:44] **RON:** Worth it. I think we've had a wonderful chat with you.

[00:44:51] **MIKE:** It's been fun.

[00:44:52] **RON:** How'd you like his interview?

[00:44:54] **UNIDENTIFIED VOICE (MIKE'S WIFE):** I liked it!

[00:44:55] **MIKE:** He's going to give us a DVD of it.

[00:44:57] **UNIDENTIFIED VOICE (MIKE'S WIFE):** Oh, good! Tell the story about the ship running into the dolphin.

[00:45:04] **RON:** Did you have one of those?

[00:45:06] **MIKE:** Yes, it was loading chips. I happened to be the supercargo on it that night. It was a 700-footer, so we were moving it from #5 Hatch to #1. On the ropes. It was a new crew. We had a wind come up. The front end just kept drifting further and further out. They kept tightening on the rear end and hit the dolphin. I was sitting in the office, filling out the book for moving the hatch, and all the whistles and horns went off. I went and I looked overboard, this was about 4 o'clock in the morning, 4:30, something like that. Fuel is just pouring out of this thing. It was like, Holy Christ! What are you going to do?

There's a dock and a guy who has a clean-up business supposed to be there, ready for this kind of thing. We called his office, and he didn't even have an extra emergency number. His hours were from eight o'clock in the

morning to six in the evening. We called the Coast Guard. We did find a bunch of those rafts that you can lay out, so the longshore guys started laying those out. The crew managed to suck the front end in. They managed to get some kind of plug or transferred the fuel over to another tank. Called the Coast Guard; they came down. They didn't have a cell phone; they wanted to use the phone on the dock. I mean really, this is like something out of Keystone Cops [incompetent fictional policemen] . I asked him about it, and I said, "Did you see it?" He said, "Oh, yes, it's not bad at all." "Really?" "Not that bad. Maybe 25-30 feet wide and it's down there 100 yards or so." I said, "You have evidently missed the really big part." When they left here, it was over 100 feet wide and it was traveling on the tide.

It took them three or four days to clean it up. Then the ship tried to say it was the dock's fault. Of course the dock said no, the dock's stable. It didn't move. It was this big going-on for a while. Then they had a trial in San Francisco, and I was called as a witness for the dock's side. And we won—or the dock won. But then, about three or four years later, it turned out the case was still alive and well. It was Lloyd's of London [insurance company] , and they were talking about bringing myself to London to testify. I thought that sounded like fun, but "There are a couple of things that you need to know." They're like, "What's that?" "I never travel without my wife, and that's always. We never travel anything below business." [Ron laughs] They went round and round with that. When they came back, they said, "Would she be willing to travel tourist? You'll travel business." I was, "That's going to be kind of uncomfortable, you know?"

[00:48:31] **RON:** Putting her down.

[00:48:33] **MIKE:** Exactly. "I don't think that's going to work." Then it turned out they settled in London, so we never did get that trip.

[00:48:40] **RON:** Damn!

[00:48:41] **MIKE:** Right. It was interesting. It was an interesting thing.

[00:48:44] **RON:** I got a trip to Japan on a job, writing an article. They were going to put me in first class, but my wife would have to ride in tourist. It was on Japanese airlines, and so I took the first class as we crossed over Hawai'i or something. Then I switched with my wife. Nobody paid any attention. Everybody was covered with blankets, especially up in first class. And so she had a great meal and a drink, and life was great. We didn't exchange anymore, but I did the first half. She did the second. And did the same coming back. It was ok. I couldn't talk them into two first class tickets, so we compromised. It was a marvelous trip. Free, you know. But that was the only big wreck, was that ship?

[00:49:59] **MIKE:** That was the only one that we ever had a real disaster.

[00:50:04] **RON:** An accident.

[00:50:05] **MIKE:** Right, right. There are oyster farms up the end of the bay. It was going towards Christmas time, and he got half a million in insurance because of his oysters. As far as I know, the oil never went that way.

[00:50:23] **RON:** But then that is so delicate!

[00:50:28] **MIKE:** Fragile, yeah. He's still grows lots of them. It didn't change his business as far as I know. One other thing I would love to talk about is probably the most exciting or moving experience I've had since I've been in the pensioners. Several years ago there was a celebration in Australia to celebrate the ten year victory over the corporation that tried to close out the longshore there. Patrick Stevedore [Patrick Corporation]. And they won over Patrick Stevedore, and it was a 10 year celebration of that. I got to go. It was a wonderful

experience. They treated us beautifully. I think there was four or five of us who went. One night they had a gathering, and they built a maritime museum. There had been a maritime museum years before, and there was a big mural that was part of that museum. When they tore down the museum, they had taken the mural and put it in cardboard boxes. Just taking it off and stacked it. That night, they were also celebrating the first panel being finally all put back together. It was held in, very large, like a hall across from where the new museum is. So everybody was standing around, talking and drinking, probably 400-500 dockers from all over the world. Everybody's standing around, talking and having a good time.

There was woman who had written play, that actually had been considered the best play in all of Australia that year. It was basically about the strike. The play is about a man's who is coming back, who had been involved in the waterfront and had left and gone off upcountry, and married somebody else, and the whole bit. He's left his wife and three kids there in Sydney. His oldest son had become a longshore person. His daughter had fallen in love with a scab, and his other kid was a musician. He comes back. It turns out the reason he's come back is because he's dying of cancer, and he just wants to get together. But there's a whole lot about what's going on within the strike. Then, he dies. What happened was, they brought some actors, and they did three vignettes from each section of the play. Which was really wonderful to watch. But at the end he dies, and they're all at the gravesite, and a young woman sang "Joe Hill." [famous union song] What was amazing was to be standing there in that hall, with 300-400 longshore people from all over the world, and everybody knew the words. They stood there mouthing the words, and tears running down their faces. It was just an incredibly moving experience. It really was. I loved it. So I want to throw it in there.

[00:53:50] **RON:** I loved Sydney.

[00:53:54] **MIKE:** It's a wonderful place.

[00:53:58] **RON:** I wrote a biography and this guy sent me—he came from Australia. I went back there to get the background in Sydney and he sent me. One of my luckier trips. I think that's a marvelous place in every way.

[00:54:22] **MIKE:** While we were there, my wife got to go see—what was it?

[00:54:26] **UNIDENTIFIED VOICE (MIKE'S WIFE):** Swan Lake.

[00:54:27] **MIKE:** At the opera house. One of the things we found out about the opera house was, when they were still building it—it wasn't finished, but it was well along its way—one day a black limousine pulled up. A man got out of the limousine and went inside, and he asked one of the workers if he could stand on the stage and try singing. "Ok, go ahead." The guy got up on the stage and he started to sing. All the workers put down their stuff. It was Paul Robeson [known for performing "Joe Hill"] . Everybody stopped working just to hear him sing.

[00:55:09] **RON:** I never saw him, but I remember "Old Man River," the way he sang that. What a voice. You know, in

1935, he was supposed to sing in Seattle. It was what they called "The Arena," and they invited him. And so, he sang in front of the longshore hall. He came back five years later, and he sang in front of the longshore hall again. Wonderful voice.

[00:55:51] **MIKE:** I got to hear him sing.

[00:55:53] **RON:** Did you!

[00:55:53] **MIKE:** Yes.

[00:55:55] **RON:** That would have been a lifetime goal for me. I love that voice. I went to a recital, and I was 19 years old. I sat there, and, gee, it was beautiful music. I went up and I said, “My name is Ron Magden, and I would just love to take you out for a Coke and talk to you. I really like the way you play the piano.” And I married her, two years later. I don’t know whether I fell in love with her piano playing first, or if I got the order—

[00:56:33] **MIKE:** Right, right, right!! [laughs]

[00:56:36] **RON:** But we were married 55 years, and she’s passed away.

[00:56:41] **MIKE:** I’m sorry to hear that.

[00:56:43] **RON:** I fell in love again, though.

[00:56:47] **MIKE:** Does this one play the piano?

[00:56:49] **RON:** No, this one does not play the piano. I wasn’t that lucky twice in a row. But my first wife played the piano every Sunday.

[00:56:58] **MIKE:** Oh, wonderful.

[00:56:58] **RON:** The kids and everybody was like, “It’s Mama’s day,” type of thing.

[00:57:05] **MIKE:** That’s wonderful.

[00:57:08] **RON:** I’ve been interviewing since 1977, longshore.

[00:57:11] **MIKE:** Oh, really? That’s a long time!

[00:57:15] **RON:** Seattle and Tacoma, you know. They usually don’t like each other, but they won’t really kick me around too much.

[00:57:22] **MIKE:** Right, I know they’ve had all kinds of problems, with one undercutting the other. These are always the rumors!

[00:57:31] **RON:** They’re true! I’m sure there are, knowing the situation. And I love to be with them. I’ve done a lot of work with articles and books, and I go to the Pensioner meetings. They’re most enjoyable. They like each other. You know, when they’re in the active field, boy, they’re at each other’s [throats] . But, jeez, the minute they retire, they’re friends; they’re buddies. They drink together. It’s a far different thing.

[00:58:14] **MIKE:** About the Pensioners’ meetings, we never had a Pensioners’ Club in the history of Eureka.

[00:58:19] **RON:** I’ll be darned.

[00:58:20] **MIKE:** What happened was, about seven years ago, the benefits specialist is in San Francisco, and he called me up. Because I was president before I retired. He said, “Will you put together, and call everybody, and ask them to come to the hall so I don’t have to keep playing phone tag with everyone? Get them all there on one

day.” So I got them all there, or all the ones who would come—because they could talk to the benefits specialist and this kind of things. He got up and was talking. He said, “Why in the world don’t you guys have a Pensioners’ Club? I could come up and do this about every three months because I have to come up for the local. Everybody’s sort of [makes grumbling sounds], and then they said, “Ok. All right. Well, Mike, you’re president [of the local Pensioner’s Club] .” [Ron and Mike laugh.] I didn’t even get to vote! We have another guy who’s always been very good with the books, and he’s our secretary-treasurer.

[00:59:17] **RON:** And you were off and running.

[00:59:20] **MIKE:** Every year I keep trying to say, “Does anybody else want this job?” [laughs] But we also are even finally getting our wives in the hall. This is one of those halls where no wife, I don’t think, had ever been in that hall. My wife used to go with me on line jobs. A couple of the other guys, their wives would go with them on line jobs.

[00:59:43] **RON:** They came into the Seattle and Tacoma locals, the wives, at the same time. They had it out. They voted to include the wives. There were about a half dozen in each pension group that just walked out. That was the end, as far as they were concerned. But the vast majority were very much in favor. Particularly, you know, that benefits officer comes every meeting, once a month. He’s there an hour before, an hour after. They talk to him, especially now with the benefit problems.

[01:00:23] **MIKE:** Is that Nick?

[01:00:24] **RON:** Nick, yes.

[01:00:24] **MIKE:** I know Nick. I like him.

[01:00:26] **RON:** He’s the best welfare officer they’ve ever had. Bar none.

[01:00:32] **MIKE:** I believe you totally. He’s a real good man.

[01:00:36] **RON:** He stays right with it. He’s just like a little dog on your pant leg.

[01:00:44] **MIKE:** He just stays with it.

[01:00:48] **RON:** And I think everybody respects his judgment. He’s there for us.